DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 444 143 CS 014 091

TITLE	Pathways to Literacy: A Centennial BOCES and Colorado Department of Education Project.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (ED), Washington, DC. Goals 2000 Program.
PUB DATE	2000-00-00
NOTE	28p.; CASSI is an acronym for Consortia Addressing Statewide Systemic Issues; BOCES is an acronym for Board of Cooperative Educational Services.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Standards; Curriculum; Elementary Secondary Education; Faculty Development; *Instructional Effectiveness; *Reading Instruction; *State Standards; *Teacher Collaboration; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS	*Colorado

ABSTRACT

The "Pathways to Literacy" program was designed by teachers for teachers as a professional development activity to integrate standards with a reading and writing curriculum. It is intended as a how-to guide to help teachers learn to do a better job of implementing standards in their classrooms, or for related purposes such as improving writing instruction or encouraging teacher collaboration. It was developed as teachers in Colorado, from kindergarten through twelfth grade, met monthly to develop a common understanding of standards, examine critically student work, and share effective classroom practices. The booklet gives an overview of how the initial groups framed their work, some advice on how others can proceed, and resources to help begin a "Pathways to Literacy" program in one's own school. The booklet is in 9 sections: (1) Introduction; (2) Purposes; (3) What Do Teachers in a Pathways Program Do? (4) How Does Pathways to Literacy Work? (5) An Overview of the Initial Groups (including Broad Goals, Major Activities and Accomplishments, and Lessons Learned); (6) Some Tips (including Starting Out, Early On, and Midway); (7) Some Protocols You May Be Able To Use (including descriptions of the Tuning Protocol--a structured way of critically examining teacher work; and the Collaborative Assessment Conference--which studies student work to determine a student's strengths and weaknesses and the implications of those findings for instruction); (8) Vignettes (some topics or activities that generated lots of discussion); and (9) Resources (listing 5 Web sites). (SR)

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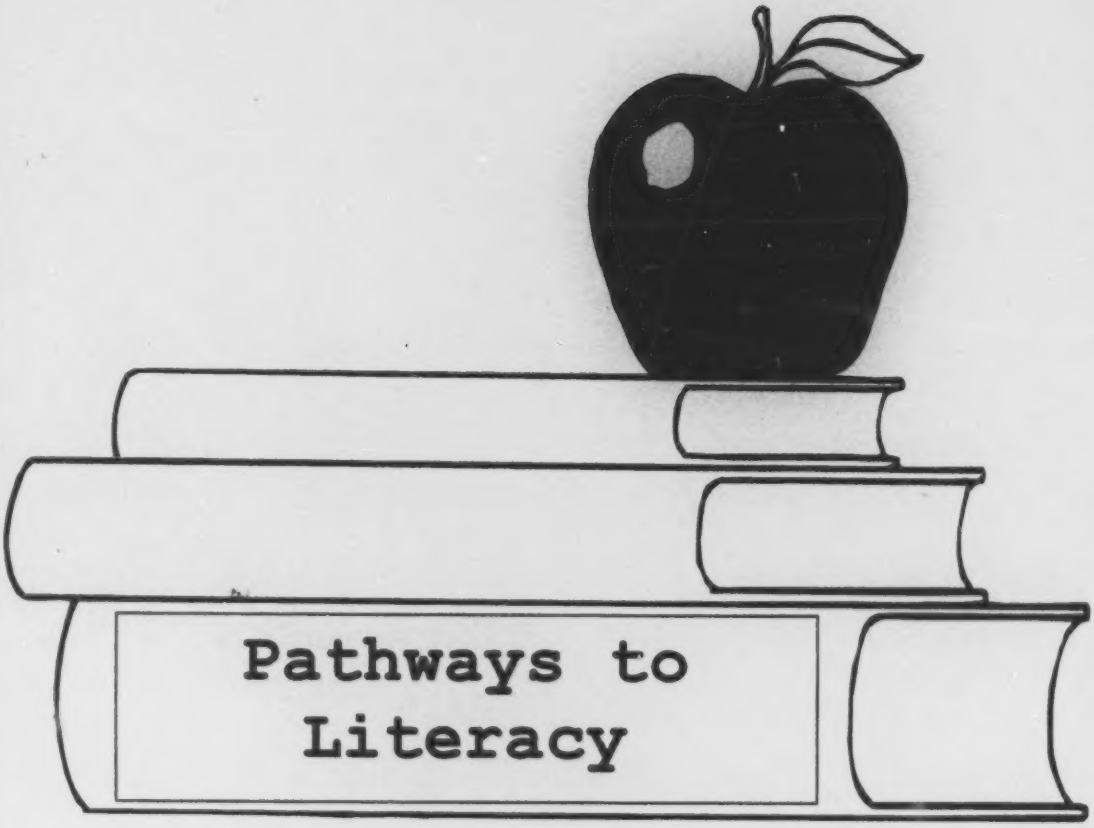

Pathways to Literacy

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A Centennial BOCES and Colorado Department of Education Project

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PATHWAYS TO LITERACY

A Centennial BOCES and Colorado Department of Education Project

Funded by Goals 2000 CASSI Grant

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Special thanks to the teachers in Adams Five Star District 12, Widefield 3, and West Yuma County RJ-1 who worked for two years on this project.

Introduction

Standards are a reality in Colorado. Now that CSAP is a reality in all grades from third to twelfth, it would be a rare teacher who is unfamiliar with the standards movement. However, just because students take a state test in reading and writing or just because a classroom wall is covered with the reading and writing standards, there is no guarantee that teachers share a common vision of what the standards look like in practice.

True, many teachers have studied the work of Centennial BOCES, such *as Operator's Manual* or *Common Grounds*. Many teachers recognize that they need to plan their curriculum "backwards" by designing the assessment before the rest of the unit is planned. Teachers know that standards-based classrooms hold rubrics sacred and that the focus is on student learning, not teacher performance.

As far as performance on the CSAP itself, we know in broad terms what kinds of support students need to do well. Studies from the Center for English Learning and Achievement (CELA), Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA), Education Trust, and NAEP emphasize several key elements in improving performance:

- A clear understanding of the standards that are the backbone of the assessment
- Articulation among teachers
- Depth over breadth
- A clear, coherent, consistent focus

However, realistic expectations and day-to-day practices are still unclear to many. It is one thing to agree that students need to apply thinking skills to their reading and writing, but another to agree on how to develop a unit incorporating that standard. Teachers need more practice in weaving the standards into their established curriculum.

Another unclear area is how curriculum and instructional practices differ at various grade levels. For instance, few high school teachers understand the writing background of their students since it's a rare middle school and high school where the teachers collaborate. Too often, curriculum within a building (and definitely across buildings) is disjointed because teachers have vastly different expectations about what their students are capable of doing.

How Pathways to Literacy Can Help

When teachers can focus on a standard and work through it, they can implement it more easily. The Pathways to Literacy program has been designed by teachers for teachers to integrate standards with a reading and writing curriculum. It's practical. It's classroom-based. It's accessible to any interested teacher.

Here's how it started. In the late 90s, the literacy coordinator at Colorado Department of Education, with the support of a Partnership/Goals 2000 grant, worked with three school systems to create literacy pathways. Teachers from kindergarten through twelfth grade met nearly every month to develop a common understanding of standards, critically examine student work, and share effective classroom practices.

Teacher comments like the following made it clear that the Pathways to Literacy program was valuable in helping teachers work with standards:

> *"As a result of Pathways, my students will become stronger writers if I continue to strive forward with standards."*
>
> *"Pathways has really forced me to focus on standards and assessments and how crucial they are to student learning."*
>
> *"It is just so sensible to develop meaningful assessments and share the rubric with my students at the beginning of the unit. As a result, observing my students' growth has been most gratifying. I did not get near the quality work last year. It is remarkable how standards-based teaching elicits quality."*
>
> *"As a participant, I feel fortunate to have benefited in many ways. I have become more of a standards-based teacher. I have learned from my colleagues. I have become a better writing teacher."*

This booklet gives an overview of how the initial groups framed their work, some advice on how you can proceed, and resources to help you begin a *Pathways to Literacy* program in your school.

We hope you can use this how-to guide to do a better job of implementing standards in your classroom. This is a journey that will challenge you, give you confidence, and make you a better teacher. Welcome!

Purposes

The structure of the Pathways to Literacy program can be used for lots of purposes. Your group might want to:

- plan a standards-based unit or curriculum
- improve writing instruction
- look at standards developmentally, so you can see a child's progress
- identify gaps in curriculum across grade levels
- break through the isolation of teachers
- encourage collaboration —
  - — among team members
  - — among teachers of different grades
  - — among teachers at different schools
- promote understanding across grades (rather than blaming the teachers who went before you)
- help students and teachers interpret writing in a similar manner
- make school reform make a difference
- analyze data, develop goals based on the data, and monitor progress toward the goals
- help individual teachers understand standards *and* help the whole school system work with standards

What Do Teachers in a Pathways Program Do?

- Gather together regularly to look at standards, classroom teaching, and student work.
- Develop a system in which reading and writing standards are linked K-12.
- Create a common vision about standards-based education in their school and/or district.
- Collaborate with teachers of all grades.
- Come to share a common vision of student writing (what makes it good, how it connects with standards).
- Pursue professional development as a team by reading texts, attending conferences, and discussing ideas.
- Become leaders in their school on implementing standards-based education.

How Does Pathways to Literacy Work?

"Critical Friends" group meets to develop the purpose and goals of the group.

Teachers meet regularly to discuss professional texts, look at student writing, and design classroom assignments and assessments.

Teachers develop a system of collaboration among teachers of various grades.

Teachers receive further training in implementing writing standards (books purchased for them, release time for workshops and conferences, release time to debrief and implement professional development ideas).

The group continually reflects on its progress and makes changes to its goals and procedures

The teachers involved become school leaders, able to share their knowledge of how to implement standards.

Teachers become more focused, aware of a larger picture, and able to use They design better classroom activities, assignments, and assessments.

Students understand more clearly what standards are, what teachers want, and how to get there.

Student performance improves.

An Overview of the Initial Groups

There were three initial Pathways to Literacy groups. Two were successful; one was less so. Here is an overview of what happened.

Broad Goals

- Develop a system in which reading and writing standards are linked K-12.
- Develop a common vision about standards-based education for teachers across all grades.
- Develop a system of collaboration among teachers of all grades.
- Improve student performance.

Major Activities and Accomplishments

Teachers from two of the three sites met every month in "Critical Friends" groups. Participants discussed professional texts about standards and writing, shared classroom practices around standards, and examined student writing. In the third group, a small group of teachers met several times during the school year for similar conversations. As a result:

- Teachers in two of the three sites linked reading and writing standards throughout various grades and developed a common vision about standards-based education.
- Teachers at each site developed a system of collaboration among teachers of various grades.
- Teachers at each site noticed an improvement in student performance.

Collaborative Goals

Teachers focused their collaborative goals. Instead of designing a plan for assessing all the standards in each grade as first envisioned, each group focused on the writing standard (Standard 2). All three groups then sharpened their focus even more by using the Six + 1 Traits Writing Assessment. As a result:

- Teachers understood that classroom assignments were appropriate assessments of the standards and moved toward a common vision of standards. (Instead of developing a separate assessment system, teachers learned to use the "typical" writing assignment as an assessment tool.)
- Teachers noted an improvement in student writing.

Professional Development

Teachers received further training in implementing writing standards. Groups of teachers from each site attended either workshops on Six + 1 Traits, the Barry Lane Writing Workshop, or other programs. They also shared information with their colleagues. As a result:

- The workshops helped support a system in which reading and writing standards were linked throughout various grades.
- The participants refined their vision for Standard 2 as it applied to various grades.
- Teachers noted an improvement in student writing.

School Leadership

Teachers became school leaders. At one site, the teachers in the Pathways group became the trainers for all the other teachers. They designed and delivered in-service training and served as mentors during the year. At the other two sites, the teacher-leaders were leaders within the school at implementing standards-based education. Administrators turned to the teacher-leaders for information and guidance. Occasionally, the two teacher-leaders provided needed training. As a result:

- Participants helped develop a school-wide vision about standards-based education for teachers in various grades.

Increased Understanding of Standards

According to self-evaluation, teachers at all three sites recognized that their knowledge about standards had grown. Two of the three sites rated themselves proficient, not advanced, in the implementation of standards. The third site rated itself "in progress."

The final reflections and surveys of teachers illustrate their deepened understanding:

- "As a participant, I feel fortunate to have benefited in various ways. I have become more of a standards-based teacher. I have

learned from my colleagues. I have become a better writing teacher."

- "Pathways has really forced me to focus on standards and assessments and how crucial they are to student learning."

Enhanced Student Performance

Using the Six +1 Traits to support the writing standard resulted in stronger writing. Excerpts from the teachers' journals illustrate:

- "Students wrote, wrote, wrote. I was especially pleased with my basic students. The ideas are there—we simply must provide an arena for them to surface."
- "When we were in the stage of editing conferences, there were many ahas! One girl realized that within her list of nouns she needed commas. She came to my desk beaming because she had found her own error and corrected it...If I hadn't taken the time to practice writing, these moments would've been missed."
- "My students are jumping in with knowing which standard we're working on. It helps to have all the language arts teachers doing this. Ah—the power of collaboration."

LESSONS LEARNED

Cognitive Dissonance

Often during the two years together, the teachers expressed discomfort with the process. Collaborating and articulating with teachers in different schools were new experiences for the participants. Looking at and discussing student work often revealed uncomfortable gaps in teacher knowledge and skill.

As one teacher leader wrote in her final report,

> *. . . for the first part of the meetings for the first year and a half, we had to go through the wailing and frustration of not really knowing what we should be doing. It did dawn on us the last three months that what we were doing was what we were supposed to be doing — talking about what we were each doing to teach/facilitate writing in our classrooms and what we could do better.*

When the entire group met at the end of the first year, a sort of cognitive dissonance also emerged. The differing expectations in

writing became clear, frustrating some of the teachers who felt others were unrealistic in their expectations.

However, the outcome in most instances was positive. The challenges propelled teachers to work even more closely together and to learn.

Time and Trust

Trust developed over time. One group did not develop trust, and the results were devastating. Success seemed to depend upon the quality of the leadership. When the teacher-leaders were proactive and initiated the meetings, the group members respected them. On the other hand, when the teacher-leader was laissez-faire, rarely called meetings, and only sporadically communicated with the group, the group disintegrated. For instance, an option for involvement with Pathways was credit from a local college. When one teacher-leader saw what was required, she decided her group would not opt for credit. This decision infuriated several people, especially since they were not aware of her decision until near the end of the project.

On the other hand, the results of developing a close, trusting relationship are revealed in a successful site teacher-leader's final report:

> *We became a close group and a trusted group. Teachers were beginning to bring in work from students to share with the group, and this was most rewarding. We learned by being exposed to students' writing what was going on in fourth grade. We were impressed.*

This willingness to share student work also revealed gaps in the curriculum. For instance, at one site they realized that writing was not emphasized in two consecutive grades. The teachers were not writers themselves, disliked writing, and preferred to teach other areas instead.

One teacher said:

> *[Our monthly meetings] gave us good knowledge where we are experiencing "holes" in the presenting of standards to students and in the teaching of writing in these three schools [the elementary, middle school, and high school]. We have some critical areas that are sidestepping what our students need and this gave us the chance to discuss how we might step in to change those problem areas. I think Pathways gave us the hope that we classroom teachers do have more influence than we perhaps know. With this group as a*

forum for educational concerns, this gave us a voice with more authority about those concerns.

Once trust was built and teachers experienced the power of collaboration, they wanted to continue the work. One comment from a journal sums up the power of collaboration:

I am proud to be a member of this group! I hope we can continue a similar group next year just for the heck of it because such collaboration is priceless!

Some Tips

Starting Out

1. Get a teacher from each grade level, if possible. Get people who want to be there, not people who have to be coerced. Members need to be willing to the commit to the time involved (monthly meetings over at least two years, reading professional texts, going to conferences, collecting student materials). *If at all possible, give people a stipend for the work they're going to do.*
2. Set up a major meeting to define the group's purposes and needs. This is an important step, worth spending a good deal of time on. You might give out copies of this booklet beforehand, so people have some idea of what to expect. Here's a possible agenda:
   - Introductions (grade level, subject, why you're here)
   - Purposes (brainstorm purposes, discuss each, move toward consensus)
   - Create a meeting structure for the project (times, leader and/or facilitators)
   - Debrief the meeting (How successful was it? Where did we bog down?)
3. Try to get administrative support for your program. Let administrators know what you're doing and why, and the commitment you're making. Ask them to make a similar commitment in time and resources. If people receive a stipend, they'll be more likely to come. And if the administration buys books, pays for substitutes, and gives release time for meetings and conferences, you'll definitely have a motivated group!

Early On

1. Gather resources. Get books and information about conferences or workshops. Make a list of people who might be able to help.
2. Here's a terrific activity for the first or second meeting, because it gives an overview of what everyone in the group is doing: have every teacher bring in an actual monthly calendar for the year, showing the learning goals/standards, major activities, and assessments. Post these on the wall and let people talk about differences and similarities.

3. Sharpen your focus as you go along. For instance, if you start with Writing Standard 2 and people are grappling with it, you might use the Six + 1 Traits Writing Assessment to give you a more concrete starting point. You need to find a starting place that makes sense to people.

4. The first Pathways group started with these texts (see "Resources" for ordering information):

   - *Operator's Manual,* produced by Centennial BOCES, to guide their understanding about standards-based classrooms.
   - *Creating Writers* by Stiggins and Spandel.
   - Six + Traits Writing Assessment framework.

5. If you're the group leader, doggedly focus on the group vision. As the vision-keeper, resist attempts to bring in issues unrelated to the group focus. Insist on freeing in-service days so teachers can have large blocks of uninterrupted time to work collaboratively. Sweep away issues that might interfere with concentration. (For instance, order books or develop a budget through email.)

6. Discuss tension and collaboration early on. Teachers, who traditionally value congeniality and politeness, may treat each other with kid gloves. But tuning protocols (see Protocols section) and working through collaborative assessment conferences demand courage as well as tact. If your group works only to preserve good feelings, you may unwisely avoid provocative and challenging questions—the very questions you need to address if you are to make a difference in student achievement.

7. Leaders can share their work first. If group leaders can put themselves on the line, acknowledging both a sense of vulnerability and group support, other group members will feel more comfortable when it's their turn.

Midway

1. Make a Mid-Year Progress Report. Use the rubric in this booklet, "How is Your Pathways Group Doing?" to talk about group progress. Set new goals based upon what you learn in this meeting.

2. Attend conferences as a team. Talk about how the ideas and materials presented will play out in your classroom. Here are some conferences and workshops the initial groups found useful (see "Resources" for contact information):

- Six +1 Traits
- Barry Lane Writing Workshop
- Colorado Writing Project
- Colorado Language Arts Society conferences

3. During meetings, keep student work at the center of your attention. Draw from research, reading, and discussion, but focus on the practical work of classrooms.
4. Follow the structure of the protocols. Occasionally group members want to rejoin the group early rather than listen and take notes, but if they remain outside they won't be tempted to use their energy on defensive statements. Sometimes groups want to skip the warm comments and go directly to the cool comments (see Protocols section). Please don't skip this important part. Presenters and responders need to be able to identify strengths as well as weaknesses.
5. Remember to debrief. People need to spend a few minutes discussing the group process—what worked or didn't work, whether comments were too general or tactless. This important step will help your group become better at collaborative work.
6. Don't argue about the best pedagogical approach (what literature to read, whether or not to do a writer's workshop). Instead, look at student work. Examine how different approaches shape student learning.
7. Enjoy the increased confidence and sense of professionalism you gain as you go through the process.

End of Year

1. Do an End-of-Year Progress Report, along the same lines as the Midway.
2. Continue to enjoy your increased confidence and sense of professionalism. People may turn to you for advice and information. Administrators may look to you for guidance. One teacher noted, "With this group as a forum for educational concerns, this gave us a voice with more authority about those concerns." You're making a difference in the lives of your students, your colleagues, and your school.

Kudos to You!

PROTOCOLS YOU MAY BE ABLE TO USE

(with examples)

Tuning Protocol*

The tuning protocol is a structured way of critically examining teacher work. The guidelines are specific, and the protocol works best if you follow them.

1. The group selects a facilitator who will keep track of time and ensure that participants follow the protocol.
2. The presenting teacher explains the work to be examined (an assignment, exercise, or activity). After explaining the task, the presenter poses the question the group should address. This often lasts five to ten minutes.
3. The group asks clarifying questions. What's very important at this point is that the questions are designed to help the listeners understand the task and the presenter's question. This often lasts up to five minutes.
4. The presenter observes while the group discusses the work together. The presenter does not participate in the discussion but does take notes on their comments.
5. The participants closely examine the work and give "warm" comments. They point out the strengths of the work, as specifically as possible. This often lasts seven to ten minutes.
6. Still examining the work, the participants state "cool-not-cruel" comments. They note problem areas, address gaps in the work, and pose questions that the presenter might want to consider. This often lasts seven to ten minutes.
7. The presenter returns to the group discussion, comments on their comments, and reflects on the next steps.
8. The group debriefs the process.

*First developed by Joe McDonald and the Coalition of Essential Schools

Chris's story illustrates how the tuning protocol works. (Excerpted from "Collaboration: Making a Difference" by Stephanie Quate. English Leadership Quarterly, August 1999.)

Molly, an English teacher, had been working with her students on a task that required students to write about a few local problems. Troubled about the quality of the student work and the lack of enthusiasm for the project, she brought the assignment to a group to "tune."

Chris facilitated this day. She began by reinforcing the familiar procedures. "For the next ten minutes, we're going to listen to the description of the work Molly has required the students to do. You might want to jot down a few notes and pay close attention to her question."

Molly explained the task and detailed the student reaction. At the end of her ten minutes, Chris turned to the group and redirected them. "Do you have any clarifying questions? Remember this is your chance to ask Molly questions that will help you understand her concerns."

One person asked, "How long did you give them to do this task?"

Another said, "Explain again what standards you were working on."

At the end of five minutes, Chris asked Molly to move out of the group and to listen to the group's discussion. Knowing the protocol, Molly scooted her chair back and opened her notebook to take notes.

For the next seven minutes, the group talked about what had impressed them about the assignment.

"I'm amazed that she would give them so much responsibility," one person said.

"The rubric certainly sets up the expectations. Look at how clearly she explains the difference between exemplary and satisfactory work."

When a teacher new to the tuning protocol made a general comment about liking the assignment, Chris probed for the detail. Later she explained that general comments aren't informative, and the purpose of the tuning protocol is to be specific about the quality of work.

"Time now for the cool-not-cruel comments," Chris said, and the group laughed at having heard this comment each time they moved into this part of the tuning protocol. "At this point, you

can point out concerns or gaps in this assignment. You might also raise questions that Molly needs to wrestle with."

"I'm confused about . . ." the group began examining the work.

After seven minutes of cool comments, Chris invited Molly to respond to what she had heard. She thanked them first and then turned to her notes. She pointed out areas the group had misunderstood and then commented that their misunderstandings were similar to those of her students. "Guess I better check on how clear I am in my expectations," she observed wryly. For the following ten minutes, Molly discussed her insights with her colleagues.

The tuning protocols did much more than point to strengths and clarify gaps in Molly's assignment. It helped create a common view of implementing standards and using rubrics. For instance, during the closing discussion, one teacher commented that by closely examining Molly's rubric, he recognized a problem with his own rubrics. Even though Molly's rubric was for student work substantially different from his, the discussion illuminated a weakness in his rubrics. As the group reflected on the work of one colleague, others were able to better understand their own teaching.

The Collaborative Assessment Conference

The Collaborative Assessment Conference studies student work to determine a student's strengths and weaknesses and the implications of those findings for instruction.

1. The group selects a facilitator who keeps track of time and makes sure the group follows the protocol.
2. The presenter distributes copies of the student work but does not explain the work, the assignment, or the student's background.
3. The presenter moves away from the group to listen and take notes.
4. The participants read the work.
5. The facilitator directs the group to describe the work. The participants briefly describe the student work, avoiding any judgments. The description continues until there are no new ideas.
6. If participants make evaluative comments, the facilitator asks for the evidence in the student work.
7. The presenter returns to the group and provides background information on the assignment or the student.
8. The facilitator asks the group to hypothesize about what the student seems to be working on. Participants ground their comments in the student work.
9. The group discusses implications for teaching and learning that emerged from the discussion.
10. The group debriefs the process.

Jeanne's story illustrates how the Collaborative Assessment Conference works. (Excerpted from "Collaboration: Making a Difference" by Stephanie Quate. English Leadership Quarterly, August 1999.)

At another school down the road, the teachers had been debating formulaic writing. One teacher argued that students needed the structure of the five-paragraph essay in order to learn to write expository text. Other teachers debated this position. Overhearing the debate, Jeanne suggested that at their next department meeting, they hold a collaborative assessment conference to describe a few expository essays. Since the district had just adopted the six-trait writing model, one teacher suggested that they focus their discussion on the six traits.

For most of the school year, the English department had restructured its regular meetings into issue groups. At most of their department meetings, they closely examined each other's assignments, using procedures similar to the tuning protocol. Earlier that month they watched a video of one teacher conferring with a rather difficult student and critiqued her skillful work.

Along with looking at instructional practices, the teachers were examining student work. For instance, shortly after attending a workshop on the six traits, teachers scored a handful of student papers to ensure that their department was interpreting the rubrics in similar ways. One teacher explained, "If I think an essay is a strong one, I'd like to know that my colleagues agree with me. Nothing is going to be more confusing for kids than to move from a teacher with one set of expectations to one with a completely different set."

At this meeting they wanted to put to bed the ongoing arguments about formula. Jeanne facilitated the discussion. "Linda has graciously agreed to share these essays by one of her students. When you get your copy of them, read them silently and then we'll begin describing them. Let's be sure to use the six traits as the framework for description."

Each member of the group read the essays, some making notes in the margin and others pausing in their reading to think. Linda was the only one not sitting in a circle. She had removed herself from the group and opened her notebook, ready to take notes.

After it was clear that everyone had read the piece, Jeanne asked the group, "As you know, Linda is not going to explain the assignments or the context in which they were written. Instead, our job is to just describe what we see here. Remember you're describing, not judging. You might want to also look carefully at how the writer organized his ideas. Dan, why don't you start?"

"I noticed that his main idea in this essay is about. . ."

The teacher sitting next to Dan quickly followed, "His third paragraph begins with a topic sentence about the main character's anger but the rest of the paragraph talks about . . ."

Another teacher looked up and said, "He loves to use transitions."

Jeanne quickly asked, "Where is the evidence in the paper of that?"

"Just that each paragraph in both papers begins with one. Look, here he says, 'My first point,' and then in the next paragraph, he says. . ."

"Um, I want to describe the voice in this paper, but it's hard to do so. He's so distant from his topic," noted the next woman. "It's not much stronger in the other one."

Again Jeanne asked, "What in these papers would lead you to that observation? Remember you want to describe, not judge."

The teacher began pointing to some of the words, noting how general they were and commenting that the student was listing general ideas with little elaboration.

Knowing the six traits well, they looked carefully at the word choice and sentence fluency. Through this description of the student work, the group noted the strong verbs in one paragraph, the sentence lengths in another paragraph, and the frequent use of transitions.

"What do you think he's working on?" Jeanne asked the group to speculate.

One teacher proposed that the writer was working on transitions while another suspected he was figuring out how to master the essay form. Through this discussion, the teachers noted that as the student was working on the five-paragraph form he had forgotten to attend to the other traits, particularly sentence fluency and voice.

As the conversation began to lull, Jeanne turned to Linda and asked her to join the group. Linda then responded to the group's comments, thanking them for the insights they triggered. Then she explained the context for the assignments, which was to teach students how to write the academic essay.

From here, Jeanne led the group to consider what the implications were for teaching. "Based on our conversation, what does this young writer need to learn?" For about ten minutes,

the teachers brainstormed with Linda about her next steps. Focusing through the lens of the six traits, they noted which of the skills needed to be addressed.

In the closing discussion, the group returned to their original concern about the five-paragraph essay. Linda summed up the group's emerging awareness, "What I realized as we were talking is that this student didn't need that structure. He's written stronger pieces throughout the year. By focusing on this particular form, I oversimplified the essay and misled him to think that it's five paragraphs that produce strong academic writing."

Not everyone agreed with her conclusion, but through the collaborative assessment conference, they were able to ground their debate in a specific example. They were teaching each other how to teach writing, mining the rich ground of student work.

Vignettes

During the first Pathways to Literacy project, teachers told stories—about their classrooms and students, frustrations and breakthroughs. Some moments generated lots of discussion.

We thought you might like to hear some of these stories. Here are some things you could do with them.

Read them and say, "Ahhhh."

Think of it as your teacher's lounge on paper.

Use them for discussion in your meetings:

"How would you tactfully respond if this person were in our group?"

"Where does a situation like this fit in with the rubric of our progress?"

Write your own vignettes and use the collection for professional development as new people enter the group.

Design a conference presentation around them.

i.

"But I Like Science Better"

The group had been meeting for four months. So far everyone but Norma had shared student writing or a proposed writing assignment. When Norma was pressed to bring something the following month, she confessed that she hated to teach writing.

"I just don't think it's as important as you all do. I know it's one of the standards, but so is science and no one is talking about that. So I've decided I'm going to focus this year on science, not writing. Besides, you're all doing it, and they'll get it again next year. Who knows when they're going to be able to do science again."

How would you respond to Norma?

ii.

"What, No Red Ink?"

Julie, a teacher from the middle school, was in a group that focused on research-based practices. The group wanted to bring those best practices into their teaching. She brought in second

drafts of personal narratives from her seventh graders. She began by saying, "I'm nervous. It's difficult to show my work and my students' work to other teachers, especially high school teachers."

"Don't apologize," said Joan, the day's facilitator. "We'll all be in your position sometime this year. Besides, we're among friends."

"Okay, here I go. I have been working this past week on introductions. They've revised their introductions twice. I don't write on their drafts but try to get around and talk to everyone while they are writing on the computer. When they're finished with their introductions, we'll go on to the body paragraphs. I'd like you to look at their papers and tell me what else I can tell them about revising their introductions."

As the group looked over the papers, there was little talking. They asked clarifying questions: "Did you assign a topic?" "What have you told them so far about revision?"

They gave warm comments: "I think there are some wonderfully creative beginnings here. It's is obvious that you have done a good job of teaching them about how to begin a paper." "I like the way there are so many different types of beginnings." "Don't you love the way this student sets up the reader for some kind of surprise?"

Then the group gave cool comments, leading to this discussion:

"Julie, do you get around to conferencing with all the kids during class?" Mary asked.

"No, it's impossible," said Julie.

"So, if you don't get around to everyone and you don't write on their papers, how do you work with some kids?"

"I guess through their mini-lessons."

"Is that enough?"

"Not for everyone."

"Tell me why you don't write on their papers," said Joan.

"I read in Nancie Atwell's book that we shouldn't write on their drafts," Julie said.

"She did say that in 1987 but she's been apologizing to teachers for years for writing that in her book. She says it was one of the biggest mistakes she made in *In the Middle.* I believe we need to give kids direct instruction, and writing on their drafts is one of the best ways to do that, I think," added Joan.

"I'll have to think about that," responded Julie.

This group grappled with how to respond to student writing, based on writing research. How can a Pathways group discuss an issue without making people feeling defensive or attacked? How can you ensure that members of your group feel okay about bringing their teaching to the table?

iii.

Who Has the Toughest Job?

One group had a discussion early on about who had the hardest job.

Merlyn, a high school teacher, said, "I think we do. We have so many papers to grade. I have 130 students and five preps. I read hundreds and hundreds of pages—thousands over the course of a semester. And forget conferencing with all those students. I just don't have enough time."

Colleen, who teaches fourth grade, said, "I don't have that many kids, but I have them all day long. And I have to teach everything. All you have is English. I have reading and writing and math and science and history and art and whatever else gets tossed at me. So I'm juggling standards for everything."

A discussion like this generally gives people a better understanding of what other teachers are up against. It helps the group see a broader picture, so they'll be more willing to draw upon the strengths of others and understand their limitations.

iv.

"Oooh, these scores are unfair."

One group decided that all their students would complete a writing task early in the year, and as a group they would assess the writing. This would serve as a pre-assessment.

When several teachers saw the scores their colleagues had assigned their students, they were surprised and depressed. They wanted to change the scores. Sandy said, "The students received no instruction so of course the scores were low. After we teach the unit, the scores will be higher. It's not fair to the students to score them so low beforehand."

What should the rest of the group do?

v.

"What *Is* Excellent Writing, Anyway?"

One group decided to put together a booklet of student writing that illustrated excellent writing in each grade, K-12. However, at the end of the year they could not agree on exemplary student work.

As they were selecting the student writing, they realized that each person had different expectations. For instance, Mary wanted to use a personal narrative from one of her seventh-graders. The student had grown tremendously throughout the year, and his work represented acceptable writing for his grade, even though the organization wandered a bit and the focus was a little broad. Additionally, the paper contained some grammatical errors.

Some of the teachers argued that this writing was appropriate for a seventh-grader, while others argued that seventh-graders could do much better. The group seemed to be at an impasse.

What should they do?

Resources

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